

When the Unthinkable Happens: Crisis Response in the Church

When tragedy strikes the church – violence, child molestation, suicide, moral failure by pastoral staff, tragic death, or natural disaster -- all staff, volunteers, and parishioners immediately look to its pastoral leadership for direction. The community scrutinizes carefully to see if faith in God truly makes a difference in these “real life” situations. How leaders respond when every eye is upon them offers both tremendous opportunity and serious risk for the subsequent outcomes. Reactions to their leadership will echo throughout the church and community as others take their cue from the charted direction. All stakeholders will go through the crisis with or without leadership and need to be led well.

Whereas pastors possess many skills, they may not have crisis leadership training, experience, or expertise that includes the “human element.” Yes, other church continuity issues such as technology, infrastructure, programming schedules, and cost containment must be addressed, but ultimately the most important asset at stake is people. Churches minister to valuable children of God. Parishioners may be grateful for their own physical safety but the spiritual and psychological outcomes of such events can be extremely difficult for everyone within the church body. A predictable set of acute traumatic stress physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions often results that can be highly distressing and inhibit the individuals and church as a whole from returning to prior levels of function. Questions of faith and world-view emerge in positive and negative ways. Subsequent anxiety about those reactions can further paralyze return-to-life and return-to-church efforts.

Also at risk are trust of leadership and a desirable “church identity”. A dynamic common to groups following a traumatic incident is increased us/them thinking accompanied by projective blaming of the boss for problems related and unrelated to the incident. People impacted by trauma predictably tend to:

- 1) Regress to more basic, primitive impulses and defenses
 - a. The brain is re-circuited toward use of functions focused upon creating an immediate sense of safety. These thought patterns are not necessarily logical as portions of the brain dealing with advanced abstract thought are “put on hold.”
 - b. Decisions tend to be impulsive, extreme, and based more on emotion than logic.
 - c. Emotional responses are magnified and self-protective.
- 2) Immediately attempt to make sense of the incident in effort to gain a feeling of control over it
 - a. The belief is that if one can understand the incident, s/he can be safer in preventing it next time.
 - b. When the answer to “why” is not available, people create one in a way that is reactive and lacking objectivity.

3) Isolate from others

- a. The lack of control experienced in the tragedy leads people to pull away from others in distrust. This may take the form of reduced church attendance or guarded engagement.

The accumulation of these factors produces conditions ripe for hostility and blame with the church's leadership positioned as the most convenient target. Following tragedy, the allegations of blame need not be accurate to be powerfully destructive. Pastors may genuinely care about their staff, board, and parishioners but must find ways to express it effectively.

Behavioral health professionals that are specially-trained as Crisis Response Consultants understand the human impact of traumatic events and are uniquely qualified to support both individual and organizational resiliency following tragedies. Due to their clinical training, they understand human behavior and the effects of potentially traumatic events, communicate empathetically, and can usually maintain poise under very stressful conditions. They have also been trained to structure effective responses to a variety of crises and to assess and triage situations in which access to additional services are required – especially imminent danger of harm to self or others. Research-informed best practices exist for the delivery of Critical Incident Response services and the combination of clinical excellence along with shared Christian beliefs and sensitivity to unique church cultures can make an immense positive difference in terms of both human and church recovery. They also come from an external, objective perspective outside the circle of impact. Selecting from a continuum of structured group and individual interventions, the Critical Incident Response Consultant provides a safe, directed environment to:

- 1) Consult with leadership to shape the response effectively
- 2) Position leadership favorably through shared messaging
- 3) Allow people to talk if they wish to do so
- 4) Identify and normalize acute traumatic stress reactions so that those impacted by them do not panic about them
- 5) Build group support within work teams
- 6) Outline self-help recovery strategies
- 7) Brainstorm solutions to overcome immediate return-to-work and return-to-life obstacles
- 8) Triage movement toward either immediate business-as-usual functioning or additional care

Crisis Care Network, the largest provider of Critical Incident Response services to the workplace, developed a crisis communication process that has been helpful for both Consultants and business leaders. The acronym ACT describes a means of Acknowledging, Communicating, and Transitioning amidst a crisis.

Acknowledge and name the incident

- Have an accurate understanding of the facts and avoid conjecture.

- Demonstrate the courage to use real language that specifically names what occurred.
- Acknowledge that the incident has an impact on everyone and that it is ok that individuals will be impacted differently.
- Acknowledge briefly that the incident has an impact on you personally. Doing so compassionately gives others permission to feel and diminishes the likelihood that you will be the target of blame.

Communicate pertinent information with both compassion and competence

- In the absence of information, people create it. Providing information reduces the likelihood of rumors, builds trust, and provides a sense of order that supports moving forward.
- Although very difficult to do when impacted by traumatic stress, communicating with both competence and compassion demonstrates leadership effectiveness in a caring way. CIR Consultants often help church leaders by scripting and coaching their messaging.

Transition toward a future focus

- Communicate an expectation of recovery. Those impacted must gain a vision of “survivor” rather than “victim”. Research indicates that humans are an amazingly resilient species as we bounce back from adversity. We are fearfully and wonderfully made!
- Communicate flexible and reasonable accommodations as people progress to a new normal. Staff members and volunteers should not all be expected to immediately function at full productivity (although some will) but will recover quicker if assigned to simple, concrete tasks. Structure and focus are helpful and extended time away from previous roles often inhibits recovery. “If you fall off a horse.....get back on a pony.”

Whereas I hope this is the most interesting article you never need, effective leadership during crises represents a meaningful ministry platform to truly make a difference in the lives of others. I believe that there is no greater honor and no greater responsibility than to be there for people on the worst day of their lives. Please access Critical Incident Response supportive resources and do it well.

Bob VandePol serves as Executive Director of Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Service’s Employee Assistance and Church Assistance Programs. Prior to his return to Pine Rest, he served as president of Crisis Care Network, the world’s largest provider of crisis response services to the workplace. He managed Crisis Care Network’s Command Center in Manhattan after the 2001 terrorist attacks and led response campaigns following of our nation’s large-scale events. Active as a keynote speaker, he has published in business and clinical journals and has frequently been featured as subject matter expert in media interviews and training videos.